

1956

Commencement address

Douglas M. Knight

Follow this and additional works at: http://lux.lawrence.edu/addresses_commencement

© Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Recommended Citation

Knight, Douglas M., "Commencement address" (1956). *Commencement Addresses*. 19.
http://lux.lawrence.edu/addresses_commencement/19

This Speech is brought to you for free and open access by the University Archives at Lux. It has been accepted for inclusion in Commencement Addresses by an authorized administrator of Lux. For more information, please contact colette.brautigam@lawrence.edu.

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

by

DOUGLAS M. KNIGHT

Lawrence College Commencement
Appleton, Wisconsin
Sunday, June 10, 1956

I think that perhaps I owe you an apology this afternoon; Commencement is a time when the President has to say all the legal phrases and impart all the legal blessings. It may seem like a felony compounded when you have to listen to him speak, too. From my point of view, however, there is a great selfish virtue in this privilege, much as it imposes on all of you. For the heart of Commencement is not the legal phrases, important as those are; the heart of it is a profoundly moving human event, not a magic carpet to fame and fortune but the outward sign of achievement and the finger pointing on to a steadily developing use in the world of everything that we have tried to give you here.

Of course give and receive are dangerous words when we use them about the experience of college. They can so easily turn into the assumption that it is the faculty's job to be hundred-gallon vats, and yours to be gallon jugs -- good, proper, respectable gallon jugs that come here to be filled and then go somewhere else to be poured out again. Something is given during your four years here, certainly, or we have failed; something has been received, or you have failed. But the living heart of human and intellectual relationship to the College and to one another is not caught by these words, or by the simple and shoddy idea behind them.

What are the real words that one can, without too deep a blush, risk using about the event of liberal education? I am tempted, if you will let me, to try out three old-fashioned ones: integrity,

community, charity -- words that are old-fashioned because they have been part of the whole developing order of western society for 2000 years, words that apply to everything we do and everything we are, but words that have a particular reference and relevance to this place.

Now the great trouble with these three words is that we have used them so often that we think we know what they mean, when actually all that we know is what we have made them mean for our own convenience. What is really alive behind the highly polished exterior of Integrity, for instance, a word that we commonly use to suggest the honest payment of debts, income taxes, and regular dividends? The real root of integrity, the attitude that makes it possible to do all these other things, is above all a sense of coherence within oneself. The conviction that our talents, our hopes, our beliefs, our passions somehow belong together and form one consistent being, that they are not just a random bundle tied together but a person, this is the conviction that a word like integrity speaks to.

Now it's not an easy thing to come by, because it means so much more than just being what we are and letting the world wag on -- that attitude is complacency instead, and sooner or later it leads to the very opposite of integrity, to the collapse of the human individual. Integrity is what we might call active individuality, not passive; and it results from the exploration and testing and development of ourselves -- it is in this sense the result of a constant tension between what we might be and what we are, between ourselves and a vision of ourselves which we can still hold as possible and desirable. One of the unique things about us as human beings, after all, is that we can have a vision

of ourselves, that we are not content to define ourselves by our desires but insist on reckoning with our hopes and dreams as well.

Without this aspect of human reality we would not exist at all as a College; for the dedications of a place like this are two -- first, to the complex truth of things, second to the constant awareness that we only grasp this complex truth if we realize that many of its aspects are beyond us. In other words, we only grasp the truth by a vision what we might know as it stands in constant challenge to what we do know. Education is concerned with the maturing of your integrity, in short, not only as it helps you to understand what you are but as it forces you to realize that a constant sense of what you might become is one of the most important aspects of what you are.

This sense of development toward something not yet achieved is the first great gift of a true education, then; but it cannot be supported without an equal sense of community as an aspect of educated life. For the nature of integrity demands, not only a vision of oneself and one's possibilities but an equal sense that those possibilities exist only as they come alive in the world. They must involve some actuality; they cannot merely be buried in the ground as unused talents. Now don't mistake me; there are many kinds of community which an individual integrity, an individual talent, can be brought to serve; and we must remember that the good poet or scholar is just as truly serving a community as the good statesman or executive. A community is not defined by real estate agents or even city planners; it is defined by a conviction in the human heart that we are most truly ourselves as we can learn in certain ways to stand together. We are most truly ourselves

through what we believe to exist beyond ourselves, the city of spirit, of conviction, of common concern that stands beyond each actual city of our lives. Without some such commonness we lose all sense of validity within ourselves as well as beyond ourselves. As William Butler Yeats put it,

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

As Yeats suggests here, of course, one cannot hold the integrity of the individual and the integrity of a community together without some grave conflicts. Granting that one only finds himself individually as he finds himself in a community of significance and shared interest, how are we to resolve the tensions, the wars of conviction against conviction, the sense of separation from those who do not think as we and yet who carry on their lives in an equal desire to bring the outward world and an inward understanding of it together?

Often we have illusions and even delusions about our power to resolve these individual conflicts rationally, by means of argument leading to conviction, by means of that respect for abstract truth which is so properly dear to academic minds. In fact, however, a college can no more find its common spirit by these means than any other community can; for the only relationship which can truly bind us to one another has a very old-fashioned name indeed -- so old-fashioned that we commonly forget its true meaning altogether. Charity stands in our society as

the cold and eminently proper recognition of the needs of others, but with the equally cold implication that those whom we support are not dear to our hearts. We have in a sense reversed the true meaning of charity, substituting the outward and visible sign for the inward and spiritual grace, and forgetting in the process that the needs which other people have are only an aspect of their full significance as people; we really should care about their need because we care about them. At one striking point in War and Peace the central figure is about to be condemned to death as a spy; at a crucial moment his life is saved, however, because his enemy cannot avoid recognizing him as an individual person. And this recognition is much closer to the root sense of charity, I suspect, than all our contribution lists.

If so, however, then we can see how and why it is the crucial force binding us to one another; it reflects, not obligation but desire. And this desire, this positive affection for one another, is the condition without which a college or a community of educated people cannot exist. For the great mark of your achievement here is precisely this willingness to live with difference which I call true charity. I hope that you won't think me casual or unconcerned when I define the educated life this way; certainly I am not recommending to you that you take standards and convictions cavalierly or in a spirit of indifference. I do say this, however: in a revolutionary time like our own, and a time of silent revolutions as well as noisy ones, we may need to be reminded that the most powerful way of maintaining or advancing our own convictions is the way of profound self-respect -- not brash self-confidence,

but that true sense of ourselves which, as I have just suggested, comes ultimately only from a loving awareness of others.

Here we are confronting, of course, one of the central paradoxes of Judeo Christian faith and tradition; to be truly aware of others is the only way to find yourself. But equally in the world of ideas, to be truly aware of what someone else is saying or thinking is the only way to discover your own modes of thought, your own convictions. Now this may sound completely obvious, but it seems to me as a living fact to be the final and most difficult attainment of a truly good life -- either a good intellectual life, or a good spiritual life. For charity as I have defined it is the creative fusion of integrity and community, the relation between the individual and his world which allows both to exist. Without it, each of us is the mere prisoner of temperament or digestion; and ideas are mere phantasms, like Scrooge's bit of undigested beef that turned into Marley's ghost. Charity is the force in us that summons us to reach beyond ourselves, and that does so through its power to lead toward a vision of final reality. As Whitehead has made clear for our generation, there is no use talking about a vision of reality unless we can include in it three things: ourselves, the objects we perceive, and the dynamic relationships between the two. The challenge of the intellectual life lies in its insistence upon the evocation and description of these relationships; but it is the challenge and necessary definition of all human life that it actually live them out. The life of the mind is a special aspect then, of the pattern which governs all life; it is neither the whole of existence, nor something odd and special to be kept safely in its own private corner. We celebrate

and honor it today; but we honor it most by realizing that its value lies finally in the fact that it is rooted in the ground which creates all life. And so when I talk to you about the truly educated person in the traditional language of integrity, community, charity, I am paying you the greatest compliment I can think of. Your mandate is to use your minds all your lives long, and to use them so that you, and your communities, and the love that must exist among us all if we are to survive, may truly flourish.